

OBITUARY NOTICE

OF

DR. HENRY BRYANT,

PREPARED BY A SPECIAL COMMITTEE, AND READ AT THE ANNUAL MEETING,  
IN MAY, 1867.

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Dr. Henry Bryant was born in Boston, May 12th, 1820. He received his early education here at Mr. Thayer's school, and was prepared for college at Mr. Welles' school in Cambridge. He entered Harvard University in 1836 and graduated in 1840, and immediately commenced the study of medicine in the Tremont Medical School and the Medical School of the University, from the latter of which he received the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1843. Soon afterwards he went to Europe to prosecute his professional studies still farther in Paris. Some time in the year 1845 he received the appointment of *Interne* in the Hospital Beaujon in Paris, an appointment specially honorable, as it is only obtainable as the result of a severe competitive examination. The close confinement and laborious duties of this office broke down his health, and he was in consequence obliged to resign his position a few months afterwards. Availing himself of an opportunity which was offered to him, through the kindness of some French army officers whose acquaintance he had made, and seeing in it a probable means of restoring his health, he joined the French army in Africa as a volunteer surgeon, and served in this capacity during a winter campaign in Algeria in 1846. It is probable that this experience, by fitting him for the responsible duties of an

army surgeon, had an important influence in leading him to offer his services in this capacity at an early date during the recent war in this country.

From Europe Dr. Bryant returned home in October, 1847, and commenced the practice of his profession in Boston, associating himself with Dr. Henry J. Bigelow as surgeon to a private dispensary for surgical cases. In carrying out the plan of this arrangement he again made a trip to Europe, where he remained for a few months. Shortly after his return home his health again failed him, under his assiduous application to his duties, and he was finally obliged to abandon the practice of his profession; this he was enabled the more readily to do, as his circumstances in life were such as not to compel him to rely upon his profession for support.

Dr. Bryant was married January 6th, 1848, to Elizabeth B. Sohier, daughter of William D. Sohier, Esq., of Boston.

After giving up the practice of his profession, Dr. Bryant devoted himself with more or less assiduity to the study of Ornithology, which had been a favorite pursuit with him from boyhood. It was at about this period that Dr. Bryant met with a severe accident, causing alarming symptoms at the time, and, as he thought himself, having much to do with the subsequent attacks of indisposition from which he suffered very frequently to the close of his life. In landing from his boat at Cohasset his foot slipped on some wet seaweed and he fell with great violence upon a rock, receiving a severe blow in the region of the stomach. He was taken up insensible, and was confined to his bed for several weeks, suffering very severely. The precarious state of his health compelled him to take a great deal of out door exercise; and his active, energetic temperament led him often to the most distant parts of this country in excursions for the purpose of collecting specimens of ornithology and other objects of natural history; and on which he was often exposed to great hardship and privation, but which only seemed to invigorate him. He had a singular power of endurance, and, invalid as he was, a most stoical indifference to considerations of personal comfort on these expeditions. Thus he passed his time, partly at his summer residence at Cohasset

in this State, partly at his house in Boston, at short intervals disappearing from sight for a few weeks or months, to return from the extreme north or south laden with the spoils of his campaign. Of late years he made quite frequent visits to the West India islands during the winter seasons, for the same purpose.

Subject to this necessity of prolonged excursions from home and an active life in the open air, the outbreak of the civil war in this country found him untrammelled by professional bonds, and prepared by a previous experience of army life to enter at once upon the arduous and responsible duties of an army surgeon. It was a time when the number of medical men thus qualified, in this country, was extremely small, and the demand for them was the most urgent. It was all the more honorable, therefore, to the subject of our notice, that, uninfluenced by any pecuniary necessity, and unstimulated by any professional ambition, with the leisure and opportunity of devoting his time in the pleasantest way to the delightful branch of natural history which he had made his special study, he yet felt it his duty to come forward early and offer his services to his country. Not content with the appointment which the necessity of the case or the influence of friends might easily have secured for him, he went to Washington and offered himself as a candidate for the office of assistant surgeon in the regular army. As might have been anticipated the severe ordeal of examination to which he was subjected was no obstacle to him, and he returned home with the commission for which he had offered himself. Without waiting for the position which this appointment might give him in the regular army, which was then dwindling into insignificance in point of numbers in comparison with the volunteer host which was mustering, he accepted the appointment of Surgeon to the 20th regiment of Massachusetts volunteers, and was commissioned in that capacity, July 1st, 1861. He was promoted to be Brigade Surgeon, September 10th, but remained with his regiment until after the disaster of Ball's Bluff in October, when he joined General Lander in the Shenandoah valley, and served on his staff until the death of that officer. He next

joined the command of General Shields in the same department, in the capacity of Medical Director. While engaged in this service he received a severe injury of the knee from his horse falling with him on icy ground. From this accident he suffered many months, part of the time being confined to his bed in extreme pain, and much of this period being unable to set his foot to the ground. His injury was so severe that the question of amputation was at one time entertained; yet during the whole of this term of service he continued on duty and did not ask for leave of absence until his convalescence was fully established. It was while suffering in this way that he organized the military hospitals in Winchester in addition to his other arduous duties. He accompanied General Shields' command to Fredericksburg in August, 1862, and in the same month was ordered to take charge of a small military hospital near Washington, known as Cliffburn hospital. Having thoroughly organized it, and put it in successful operation, he left it, by orders from Government, for Washington, December 23d, 1862, where he took charge, on the 30th, of the Lincoln Hospital, one of the first of the large army hospitals, at a time when the elaborate system under which so many were subsequently planned and put in operation by the Medical Department of the army was as yet in embryo. Upon him individually, therefore, rested the whole labor of planning and putting into execution the multitude of details involved in so responsible an experiment. That his efforts were crowned with the most complete success is the verdict of every medical man who had an opportunity of visiting his well-ordered establishment. In fact the Lincoln Hospital under his administration was regarded as a model hospital. But here, as on every occasion before, where he had been exposed to the exhaustion attendant upon close confinement and excessive mental labor, his strength and health failed him, and finally, completely broken down, he was compelled to throw up his commission and resign his place in the army in the month of May.

A characteristic extract from a letter to a friend, dated

May 1st, 1863, shows his determined spirit, and to what an extremity his indisposition had brought him. He writes:—

“ I am as nearly dead as a man can be without stopping his breath. I have not touched a morsel of food for seventy-two hours; and for the week previous did not eat more than three ounces a day. I can not at times drink a mouthful of cold water without suffering excruciating pain. I am so weak that I can hardly stand, but I have to work all the time. If I don’t get better shortly I shall leave and let everything go.”

After the establishment of peace in this country, he visited Europe once more, accompanied by his family, whom he left there after a few months, returning to this country *en route* of another ornithological excursion to the warmer latitudes of North America. Again he crossed to Europe, and again returned to Boston towards the close of 1866. He sailed for Porto Rico, December 1st, and arrived there on the 9th, intending to proceed to St. Thomas, but which he was deterred from doing by the reports of the prevalence of cholera and yellow fever in that island. He remained, therefore, at Porto Rico, and on the 28th of January, 1867, after travelling in the island, he reached Utuado. On the 29th he shot for an hour or two in the afternoon in this mountainous region without fatigue and slept well. On the 30th he was taken sick with what he regarded as rheumatism, suffering excruciating pain in his back and limbs. According to the statement of his companion, his pain was such as to compel him to leave the house and walk the street to relieve his intolerable restlessness; a circumstance which indicates that his suffering must have been very great, as he had, on ordinary occasions, an uncommon power of endurance and self-control. A large dose of opium quieted him at last, and he passed a comfortable night. On the 1st of February, finding that his symptoms were no better, he determined to go to Araceibo, a distance of twenty-five miles, on horseback. His pain was excessive, but at ten o’clock he and his companion mounted their horses and rode until one. Although suffering intensely, with characteristic energy he dismounted at a bridge at one o’clock for the purpose of shooting some swallows which were flying over the river, and fired twice.

From that point to Araceibo, a distance of eight miles, he was compelled to walk most of the way, being unable to bear the motion of riding. The following night he slept well, having taken a glass of whiskey and water and a heavy dose of opium at bed time. He had proposed starting in a carriage for St. John, a distance of fifty miles, on the following morning. On being called by his companion at six and a half o'clock he inquired what time it was and said he felt better. He then asked to be called at seven, as he did not wish to rise then. At seven a druggist came in to learn how to skin a bird, Dr. Bryant having promised to teach him. At first he declined for want of time, but afterwards sent for a bird skin and explained the process. At ten minutes past seven he rose and dressed, came out of his chamber and took some coffee, but seemed stupid and heavy, and returned to his chamber, asking his companion to get his luggage ready. At half past seven the coach came, the trunks were put on, and he was called but did not answer. On going to his room he was found in a state of unconsciousness from which all attempts at arousing him were unavailable. His symptoms pointed to the brain as the seat of some grave disease, and he received the most assiduous attention of his physicians until he died, which event took place at a quarter past four, P. M.

This brief history of the life and death of our departed associate is all which the Committee have been enabled to prepare. The absence of all of his nearest relatives from the country deprives them of the opportunity of giving many details which they would have been glad to have presented. Enough has been said, however, to show that Dr. Bryant was a man of no common kind. To many of his acquaintances, however, he was, in some respects, an insoluble problem. He was regarded by most people as somewhat peculiar and eccentric, and the Committee feel it their duty, therefore, to dwell a little upon certain points in his character which were not generally well understood.

He was well known to a large number of persons, in the sense that certain traits and peculiarities of his were familiar to them. But these peculiarities, in the judgment of those

who knew him best, rather concealed than showed his real character. For instance, he was often very communicative, extremely free in his mode of address, even with strangers or persons entitled by age or station to superior respect; and probably seemed to most people exceedingly free and easy and demonstrative. At the same time, perhaps his strongest characteristic was reserve; a reserve so deep-seated and habitual that even the familiarity of years, and entire mutual confidence did not do much towards really removing it, even after it had ceased to be a concealment. His repugnance to speaking of matters which touched him closely, though there might be nothing in them that he wished in the least to conceal, was remarkable, and stood in strange contrast with the extreme irreverence and the off-hand way in which he handled any topics of only general interest. This reserve was not always passive merely or silent, but aggressive, and showed itself in banter and mystification, and in an assumed cynicism, which formed much of the surface he showed to the world. Beneath this, the real man was of an almost childlike simplicity and affectionateness, and of an integrity that revealed itself in naive astonishment when he found the disbelief in unselfish motives which he so often professed, really acted upon by another. The key to much that was puzzling in him is to be sought in the combination of quick and even overquick perception, and a lively, impatient disposition (lacking at the same time all heat of temper), with an utter want of that *social conscience*, that mastering sense of what is usual and what is expected, which makes better citizens sometimes of persons far more scantily provided by nature than he. The absence of it saved him no doubt from many snares that beset most men's paths, but he missed with it the useful effect of the old ruts of convention in utilizing energy and in supplying a ready-made guidance always at hand, and at any rate much better than none. Dr. Bryant said of himself that his great defect was too much quickness. What he needed was to run weighted and between fences. Wanting these external helps, driven by his vivacious temperament, impatient of inaction and still more impatient of routine, his energies found no suitable outlet in

steady work, but escaped in an irregular and fitful way, in self-appointed tasks, shrewdly planned and admirably executed, so far as they were executed at all, but undertaken, avoided, or dropped rather as whim or chance might dictate, than of any settled purpose.

Ill-health had, no doubt, much to do with this. But the waste of force was aggravated by something deeper than mere bodily disturbances. His insufficiently balanced energy made him hard to please with any attainable results of his own or others, not from censoriousness, for there was not a grain of malice or sourness in him, but with the necessary effect, often, to leave him to take up with something inferior merely as less inviting attack.

He dearly loved thoroughness, and insisted upon it in all that he did or directed, and in himself or in others could more easily tolerate omission than slack performance. His acute logical intellect took nothing for granted and received nothing upon hearsay or second-hand assurance. This love of exactness, however, was no love of quiddling, but he looked always to substantials, and readily seized the point of real importance. Hence it was, no doubt, that with all his tenacity of purpose he always gained and kept the respect and attachment of those with whom he had to do, for they felt that it had in it nothing of fussiness or self-importance, but came only from an uncompromising adherence to a really elevated standard. He was true as steel, through and through genuine, and with far more kindness and far wider comprehensiveness and sympathy than he ever liked to show.

In his dealings with others, his intellectual honesty and clearness of sight, his horror of fallacies and conventionalities, together with his recklessness of appearances and of consequences made him impatient of any suspension of judgment, and needlessly intolerant of those *buffers* of sentiment which between most people ease off the shocks that human infirmities render inevitable. He must go straight to the end that happened at the moment to be before him, and the consequence was a certain want of poise and of breadth of view. Upon these obstructions he wasted too much of his

strength ; and though he made his mark and lived not in vain, yet now only his friends can know what possibilities lay in him, and how superficial were the hindrances that prevented them from being fully realized. They alone can know the real elevation of purpose and the real humanity that were often hidden from the eyes of the world under an assumed air of carelessness or of cynicism.

Dr. Bryant was elected a member of the Society November, 1841, and appointed cabinet-keeper at the annual meeting in 1843, but resigned November 1st of the same year. In 1854 he was elected Curator of Ornithology, which office he filled until his death. In 1855 he also took charge of the Entomological collection for a time.

During his connection with the Society he read the following Communications and Papers, which were published by the Society.

- 1853. *February 3.* A paper on the non-identity of *Grus canadensis* and *Grus americana*.
- 1857. *January 21.* On the birds observed at Grand Manan and at Yarmouth, N. S., from June 16th to July 8th, 1856.
- March 4.* Communication on the supposed new species of Turkey from Mexico, described by Mr. Gould.
- 1859. *January 19.* On birds observed by him in East Florida, south of St. Augustine.
- July 6.* A list of birds seen at the Bahamas from January 20th to May 14th, 1859, with descriptions of new or little-known species.
- 1860. *January 18.* A Paper on *Turdus minimus* and *Vireo bogotensis*, from Bogota.
- 1861. *January 16.* Remarks on some of the birds that breed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.
- March 6.* Remarks on the variations of plumage in *Buteo borealis* Auct., and *Buteo Harlanii* Auct.
- March 20.* Monograph on the Genus *Catarractus* Moehring.
- 1863. *July 1.* Description of two birds from the Bahama Islands, hitherto undescribed; *Pitangus bahamensis* and *Saurothera bahamensis*.
- December 16.* Description of a new variety of *Parus* from Yarmouth, N. S.; also Remarks on the Genus *Galeoscoptes* Cabanis, with the characters of two new genera, and a description of *Turdus plumbeus* Linn.

1865. *January 4.* Remarks on the type of *Buteo insignatus*; also Remarks on *Sphyrapicus varius* Linn.

1866. *January 3.* A list of birds from Porto Rico presented to the Smithsonian Institution by Messrs. Robert Swift and George Latimer, with descriptions of new species and varieties.

*October 17.* Addition to a list of birds seen at the Bahamas.

*December 5.* A list of the birds of St. Domingo with descriptions of some new species or varieties.

Dr. Bryant also published in the *Comptes Rendus*, xxvi, p. 276, 1848, a paper on the *Corpus striatum* in birds.

During the last ten years he made the following expeditions for scientific research and collections, viz.: To Grand Manan, Florida, Bahamas, Florida, Canada and Labrador, North Carolina, Cuba, Jamaica, Bahamas, Porto Rico.

His Donations to the Society are as follows:—

1859. A collection of reptiles, fishes, crustaceans and shells from the Bahamas.

1860. Miscellaneous collections from Labrador and Florida.

1861. A valuable collection of skins of mammals procured by him through the Smithsonian Institution.

1864. Three hundred mounted foreign birds from his own collection, and three hundred and forty-six specimens of mounted birds obtained by him from the Smithsonian Institution; the specimens from this Institution, in the last two donations, having been procured through pecuniary aid received from him.

1865. Twenty-five hundred specimens, chiefly shells and insects. Five hundred specimens of fossils from Lyme Regis.

1866. The magnificent Lafresnaye collection of birds, containing nearly nine thousand specimens, was purchased by him at Falaise, France, and presented to the Society. Of this addition to the Museum, Prof. Baird, in a letter to the Committee, writes as follows:—"I have little hesitation in saying that no other single cabinet in Europe, public or private, contains so many types of American species, and could I have chosen at will, I certainly would have selected that in your possession as the most desirable to have in America. This is due to the fact that Lafresnaye, during the many years in which he was occupied in forming his collection, was the principal authority for South American ornithology; and nearly all the principal gatherings from Bogota, Ecuador, Bolivia, etc., passed into his hands for description, and either by purchase or donation he retained for himself types of his species."